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AUTHOR Fuehrer, Ann E.; Keys, Christopher B.
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ABSTRACT

Research on mutual-aid groups has begun to examine reasons for joining and outcomes, but few investigations have focused on the processes of group development or interaction. The applicability of a therapy-group development model to student mutual-aid groups was examined to determine the extent to which specified formal group structure and behavioral expectations affect the ability of group members to perform constructively and cohesively. To test this model, participants were randomly assigned to groups of high or low formal structure for four weekly sessions to assess the performance of group behaviors, "ownership" of group functioning, and group cohesion. The results show that the processes of group development in mutual-aid groups parallel those in therapy groups. Formal structuring by the group leader can have both positive and negative effects, and must be used judiciously. Future research may be able to identify generic processes characteristic of different types of change-induction groups. (Author/CS)

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Group Development in Self-help Groups for College Students

Ann E. Fuehrer

Christopher B. Keys

University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

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Group Development in Self-Help Groups

for College Students

Self-help, or, more appropriately, mutual-aid groups have been formed to help people cope with a wide variety of life transitions and crises, including parenthood, divorce, major surgery, or the death of a family member (Durman, 1976). One important transition which also may be facilitated by the support of a mutual-aid group is entering college. Alienation among college students is a well-documented phenomenon (Berger, 1952; Galassi and Galassi, 1973), and there are numerous potential benefits to be gained from mutual-aid groups of students. Research on mutual-aid groups has begun to examine reasons for joining and outcomes, but virtually no one has investigated the processes of group development or interaction (cf. Lieberman, 1976; Lieberman and Borman, 1976).

The present study examined the applicability of a model of early development in therapy groups to the functioning of student mutual-aid groups. Bednar, Melnick and Kaul (1974) suggest that, in the beginning of a therapy group, expectations for member performances are ambiguous. As formal structure develops in the group, or as that structure is imposed by the leader, members are unlikely to take responsibility for group functioning. With the delineation of group structure to specify expected high-risk behaviors, members are more able to perform as constructive group members. That is, because members understand what is expected of them, they are free to take greater risks and to perform more constructive group member behaviors. This greater participation leads to greater involvement in and attraction

to the group, both important components of group cohesion. With greater cohesion eventually comes greater responsibility for the group, and the importance of leader and formal structure inputs diminishes.

Figure 1 illustrates Bednar, Melnick, and Kaul's model of early group development which has been modified to be more general and more applicable to mutual-aid groups. Member risk-taking has been replaced by the more general role functions and responsibilities, "perceived importance of performing constructive group member behaviors." Bednar, Melnick and Kaul's "risk-taking" is essentially an example of "constructive group member behavior" in therapy groups. The present study tests this model by examining the effects of varying levels of group structure on early group development. The specific hypotheses are:

1. The degree of group structure is positively related to perceived importance of performing constructive group members behaviors at time 1.
2. The degree of group structure is negatively related to member ownership of the success of group functioning at time 1.
3. Perceived importance of performing constructive group member behaviors is positively related to perceived group cohesion.
4. Perceived group cohesion at time is positively related to member ownership of the success of group functioning at time 2.
5. Perceived group cohesion at time 1 is positively related to perceived importance of performing group member behaviors at time 2.

Method

Research participants. Participants were 47 male and 54 female undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle who volunteered to participate in mutual-aid group discussions on student alienation and loneliness. Participants were introductory psychology students who received experimental credit for their participation.

Research design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, high or low degree of formal group structure. They participated in groups of five or six, with at least two males and two females in each group. There were eight high structure and nine low structure groups.

Measures. Three measures were used to appraise importance of performing constructive group member behaviors, member ownership of the success of group functioning, and perceived group cohesion. The measure of importance of performing group member behaviors consisted of the sum of participant ratings of the importance of performing 14 group member behaviors (e.g., "sharing relevant thoughts and feelings," "attending every meeting," and "listening to others"). The measure of member ownership of the success of group functioning consisted of a member's estimate of the percentage of the group's success that could be attributed to his or her own contribution. The measure of perceived cohesion was an adaptation of Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles' (1973) Feelings about the Group Questionnaire. The scale measured five components of perceived cohesion: comfort in talking in the group about own feelings of alienation and isolation; member

goals for the group and the group's success in meeting those goals; attraction to the group; attraction to other members and the leader; and level of member participation.

Procedure. The group met weekly for four consecutive weeks for a total of five hours. Additional time was taken at the end of the second (time 1) and fourth sessions (time 2) to complete all evaluation measures. In the high structure condition, in the first session, one of three male assistants gave subjects instructions concerning constructive group member behaviors and an opportunity to practice sharing and giving feedback. Throughout the course of the group meetings, the group facilitator (a female psychology graduate student with considerable experience in group facilitation) insured that the group followed the behavioral instructions presented by the experimenter. She posted a summary of those instructions, and helped structure group interaction. She helped members to own their statements, to share their feelings, and to give feedback to each other. In the low structure condition, in the first session the male assistant asked group members to discuss what a group is. During the group sessions the group facilitator was less active and more nondirective. She did not attempt to structure the participation of other members in any specific way.

Manipulation check. All group sessions were tape recorded. Five measures from the recording were used to check the manipulation of group structure: number of statements made by the facilitator, number of seconds spoken by the facilitator, number of times the facilitator asked members to self-disclose, number of time the facilitator asked members to

avoid interruptions, and a number of times the facilitator redirected the topic of conversation. One randomly selected 10-minute segment of each group session was rated independently by two trained raters who were unfamiliar with the hypotheses and conditions of this study. These five leader behaviors were reliably rated by the judgest (coefficient alpha > .85 for each behavior).

Results

Preliminary analyses. A MANOVA and univariate ANOVA's indicated that all five of the leader behaviors occurred with greater frequency in high structure groups than in low structure groups (Table 1). MANOVA results indicated that there was no significant effect of sex of participant on the set of three dependent measures (performing member behaviors, ownership and cohesion). The data were combined for males and females in all further analyses.

Experimental hypotheses. A path analysis was used to determine the strengths of hypothesized relations among the variables in the model of early group development (Figure 1). The path analysis procedure included the calculation of correlations and partial correlations among the variables; the solving of regression equations for the six dependent measures; and the calculation of path coefficients (Heise, 1975). All five hypotheses were tested by calculating standardized regression coefficients (Betas), which could be used to predict scores on dependent measures (Figure 2). For the path analysis, number of seconds spoken by the facilitator during

a session was used as a behavioral index of the amount of formal structure. This index was used because it has face validity and reliability, is quantitatively precise, and includes the other measures of structure. Results for each hypothesis are presented separately:

1. As hypothesized, degree of group structure was positively related to perceived importance of performing group member behaviors at time 1 (Beta=.251, $p<.05$). Also, group structure and importance of group member behaviors at time 2 were related (Beta=.139, $p<.05$).
2. As hypothesized, group structure was negatively related to ownership of group success at time 1 (Beta=-.227, $p<.05$).
3. As hypothesized, perceived importance of performing group member behaviors was positively related to perceived group cohesion at time 1 (Beta=.326, $p<.05$). Also, perceived importance of performing group member behavior at time 1 was positively related to perceived group cohesion at time 2 (Beta=.274, $p<.05$).
4. As hypothesized, there was a positive trend relating perceived group cohesion at time 1 and member ownership of the success of group functioning at time 2 (Beta=.154, $p<.10$).
5. There was no significant relation between perceived group cohesion at time 1 and perceived importance of performing group member behaviors at time 2.

Discussion

The results provide support for applying a modification of Bednar, Melnick, and Kaul's (1974) model of early group development to mutual-aid groups. There was support or partial support for four of the five hypotheses derived from that model. Thus, the processes of early group development in mutual-aid groups parallel those in therapy groups. These findings have implications for leaders of mutual-aid groups. They suggest that formal structuring by the group leader can have both positive and negative effects and must be used judiciously.. With too little structure, participants may not realize the importance of performing constructive group behaviors and thus may slow the development of group cohesion. With too much structure, participants are less likely to feel ownership of group accomplishments.

In terms of method, first the current research indicates that the group proceeses of mutual-aid groups can be studied in a relatively rigorous manner. Second, this study demonstrates the usefulness of path analysis as a method for analyzing the complexity of group processes.

Finally, because the results indicate that models of therapy groups can apply to mutual-aid groups if modified appropriately, the hope exists that future research may identify generic processes characteristic of a variety of change induction groups.

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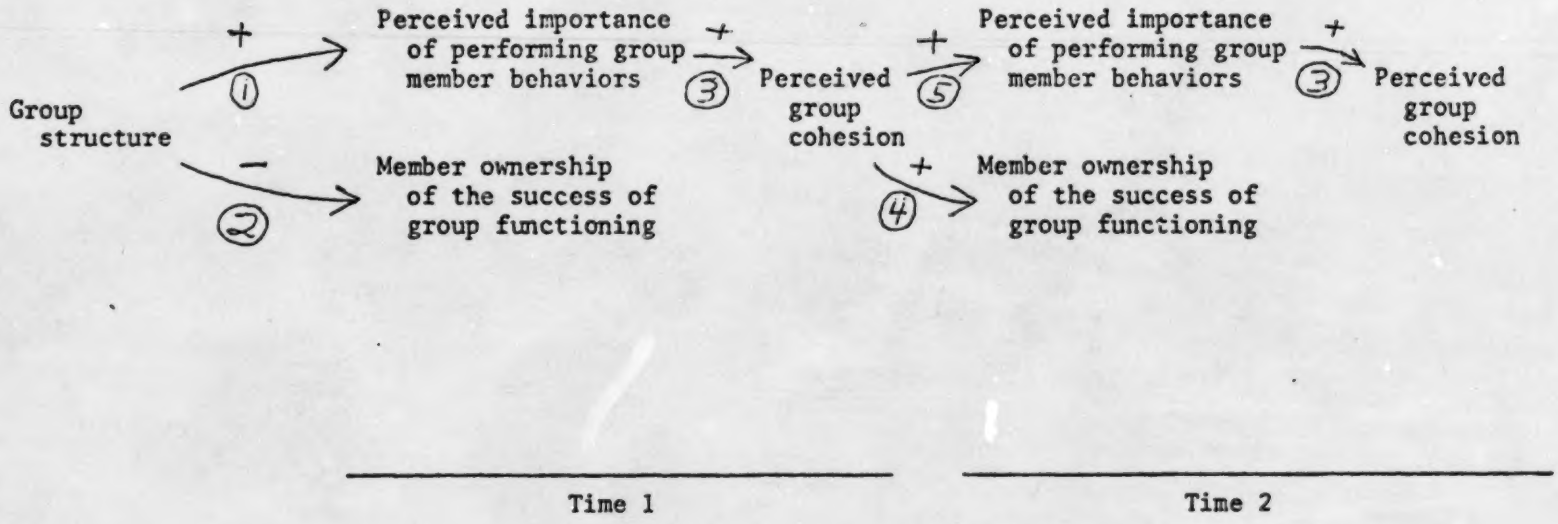
Table 1

Multivariate and univariate analyses of facilitator behavior as a function of structure: A manipuation check

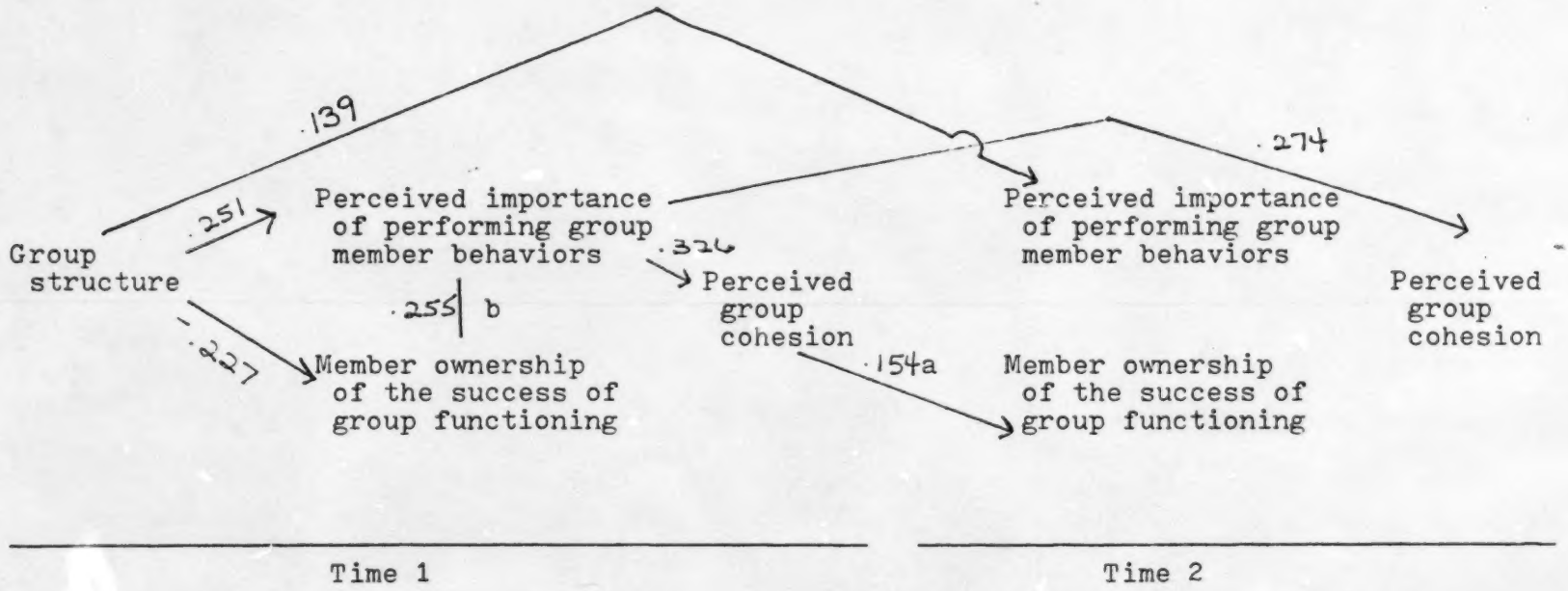
Multivariate analysis	df	F	p
Group structure	11,75	33.54	.001
Univariate analyses			
Group structure			
number of statements	1,97	10.05	.002
number of seconds	1,97	35.33	.001
requests for self-disclosure	1,97	75.78	.001
requests for avoiding interruptions	1,97	8.41	.005
redirect conversation	1,97	87.79	.001

Figure 1. Bednar, Melnick, and Kaul's model of early group development, as modified for mutual-aid groups



NOTE: The encircled numbers refer to the hypotheses

Figure 2. Path analytic model of early group development



[a] Significance level is p less than .10; all other coefficients significant, p less than .05.

[b] Beta cannot be accurately estimated, since the measures covary. This is the partial correlation coefficient, controlling for the effect of group structure.

[c] Correlations between scores on all three measures at Time 1, and their retest at Time 2, are significant, p less than .01. All other relations are non-significant.